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A Framework to Study Trans-Media and Cross-Cultural Adaptations

Literature Review

Before the 1960's, adaptations were condemned for their mimetic nature. The opinion that film adaptations of literature lacked creativity and expression was shared by writers and film makers alike. Modernist writer Virginia Woolf, believed that the film medium could never capture the rich imagery and dense characterization that constitutes great literature. Similarly, Alain Resnais, twentieth century French director, believed that writers completely express themselves with their work, leaving nothing for the film makers to do (Beja 79).

The 1960's brought a positive change to the study of adaptations. The field gained academic attention with George Bluestone's 1957 publication of *Novel to Film*. Bluestone discussed techniques for the analysis of adaptations, criticising film reviewers for valuating film adaptations based on their fidelity to the original work. He reckoned that such analysis techniques were purely quantitative and did not address the adaptation process. 'They merely establish the fact of reciprocity; they do not indicate its implications for aesthetics' (Bluestone 5). Additionally, they advanced the idea 'that the novel is a norm and the film deviates at its peril' (5), thus classifying film adaptation an inferior art form. Bluestone reproached such theories, arguing that 'the filmed novel, in spite of certain resemblances, will inevitably become a different artistic entity from the novel on which it is based' (64), and should be analysed in that capacity.

Despite his pioneering work in the field of Adaptation Theory, Bluestone

did not address the process of adapting a work from literature to film. Two decades later; film critic, writer and poet Béla Balázs approached this issue. Balázs argued that the original text should merely be raw material to the film maker, and its form should be ignored. An adapted work should be a ‘re-interpretation’ of the original work.

In *Film and Literature*, Morris Beja raises the question of fidelity in an interesting form, ‘What should be uppermost in a filmmakers mind: the integrity of the original work, or the integrity of film to be based on the work’(Beja 80). Beja contrasts Balázs’ argument with that of the French film critic, Andeé Bazin. Bazin argued films that focus too much on being cinematic tend to become copies of each other. He contended that film makers should ‘care the least for fidelity in the name of the so-called demands of the screen who betray at one and the same time both literature and the cinema’(81). Studying the various theories on the adaptation process, Beja concluded that although it is important to consider what the adapted film takes from the original text, it is equally important to consider what the film brings to the original text. The adapted work should not be an illustration nor a departure, it should be ‘a work of art that relates to the book from which it derives, yet [is] also independent’(88).

Up into the late twentieth century, adaptations were studied as a branch of literature or film studies. Though theories had started to depart from the course of fidelity based discussion, the source text was still considered a critical part of the creative and analytical process. In the early twenty-first century, work by Linda Hutcheon and Thomas Leith redefined this norm. They proposed a paradigm to realize adaptations as being ‘foundational to the extent that any audience experiences an adaptation as an adaptation’(Leith). Hutcheon contrasted parodies with museum exhibits to illustrate how audiences view the former as an

adaptation, but not the latter. With this she exemplifies her notion that audiences ‘must experience the adaptation *as an adaptation*’(Hutcheon 172).

Despite her revolutionary work in adaptations, much of Hutcheon’s work is in unison with that of her contemporaries. In *A Theory of Adaptations* she discusses both the analytical and creative process. ‘Perhaps one way to think about unsuccessful adaptations is not in terms of infidelity to the prior text, but in terms of a lack of creativity and skill to make the text one’s own and thus autonomous’(20). She understands the creative process to be ‘of interpreting and then creating something new’(20).

Hutcheon was the first scholar to go beyond the scope of literary and film adaptations, exploring adaptations across different forms of media. Her 2006 publication of *A Theory of Adaptations* played a significant role in establishing Adaptation Theory as an academically recognized field of study. The launch of Oxford University Press Journal, titled *Adaptation*, actualized this. Though it was established to ‘interrogate the phenomenon of literature on screen from both a literary and film studies perspective’, the journal has provided forum for discussion beyond those media paradigms. The popularity of the *new media* inspired discussion of ‘technical restraints and social practices’(Moore) that govern a variety of different media.

Hutcheon and Leith’s definition necessitates that an adapted work is viewed as adaptations by the audience, deeming them to a subordinate degree. Theorist Robert Stam argues that ‘literature will always have axiomatic superiority over any adaptation of it because of its seniority as an art form’ (Hutcheon 4). Both these definitions deny adaptations the individuality they deserve. An adaptation is the product of a creative process, and is as much a work of art as the original.

While defining adaptations, it might be useful to shift focus to a common

thread that appears in many adaptation theories throughout history. Theorists agree that adaptations need to be new and different from the source text, independent in their own capacity. Hutcheon determined that the role of an adapter is to reinterpret the source text. The media and cultural paradigm of the adapted work influences this interpretation. Analogous to languages, each medium is governed by grammatical rules that differentiate it from other media. These rules help understand the difference between *cinematic* versus *literary* work. Consideration of the benefits and flaws of literary and film media has been a pertinent part of Adaptation Theory in the twentieth century. Moore's discussion of video games in 2008 illustrated the differences between the grammar of the *new media* in comparison with that of traditional media. Similarly, different cultures have unique traditions and priorities that characterise them. An understanding of these rules and traditions helps adapters use the destination media and/or culture to its full potential.

Adaptations theorists take for granted that the adapted work must resemble its source material. The challenge is to determine what must be preserved. Russian theorist Tomeshavsky defines the 'irreducible part of the work' as being its motif. Though most theories consider the story to be 'the core of what is transposed across different media', film reviewers and the audience members 'experience the story in a particular material form', inseparable from the mode of mediation. Tomeshavsky understands the story to be the core, serving as the pretext to the plot. According to him, the plot 'is where the artistry lies' and is 'is organized by the artist into a sequence to suit his own purposes'. Other measures of the *spirit* of a work include Lindens understanding that the tone is central, or Seger's theory that the style is the irreducible part of a work.

Each of these formularization come together to constitute the spirit of a

work. Tomeshavsky's definitions of story, congruent with Eliot's definition of content, is central to a work and thus irreducible. The plot or form may be omitted by the adapter. Sequence of events, or even individual events, are inconsequential in the adaptation provided the dominant themes are present. The importance of preserving the tone and style is more subjective. There are some stories where tone and style is central to the impact of the work, where others focus more on content. The writings of P.G. Woodhouse and Oscar Wilde rely entirely on the style, where as style is inconsequential in adapted works of Jane Austen. It is the discretion of the adapter to assess the pertinency of the style or tone of the source material.

An adaptation can be defined as a work of art, void of all elements specific to the source media and culture, that transports the spirit of the work to a new media and/or cultural paradigm. When a work borrows some themes from its source without capturing the spirit, it is a mere inspiration, whereas, work that preserves the media and cultural conventions of the source material along the story should be regarded as a copy. Similarly, adaptations set in the same medium and culture as their source should be regarded as copies, as they follow the same conventions as their source. Here culture can be defined to mean a different ethnicity, geography, time, or any system governed by a different heritage. It is the task of an adapter to find the balance between these two realms.

Framework

In *Literature into Film: Theory and Practical Approaches*, Linda Cahir presented an aesthetic rubric for film translations of literature. According to her rubric, an adaptation should be the filmmakers interpretation of the integral meaning of the literary text. It should be a collaboration of filmmaking skills resulting in self-reliant work that is an aesthetic offspring, but not completely independent of the source material.

Using our definition of adaptations and borrowing from Cahir's rubric, we can create a framework to address adaptations across media and cultural paradigms. There are three critical points that should be considered while creating and valuating adaptations.

1. The adapted work must preserve the spirit of the source material.
2. The adapted work must be set in a medium and/or culture that is different from its source.
3. The adapted work must compass expressions of the destination media and/or culture, as the case may be.

To understand this framework better, the rest of the paper will focus on illustrating the framework through examples. The following table describes a summary of the adaptations discussed.

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